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ABSTRACT

This lesson shows how the Inca communicated across the vast stretches of their mountain realm, the largest empire of the pre-industrial world. The lesson explains how couriers carried messages along mountain-ridge roads, up and down stone steps, and over chasm-spanning footbridges. It states that couriers could pass a message from Quito (Ecuador) to Cuzco (Peru) in 10 days, about the same time as it takes today's postal service to deliver a letter between these two cities. The lesson plan: provides an introduction; cites subject areas, time required, and skills developed; poses a guiding question; informs teachers about preparing to teach the lesson; offers four suggested classroom activities and an activity to extend the lesson; lists selected Websites; and addresses standards alignment. (NKA)

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CS 512 085

Couriers in the Inca Empire: Getting Your Message Across

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES
EDSITEment
marcopolo

GRADES 3-5

Introduction

This lesson will show how the Inca communicated across the vast stretches of their mountain realm, the largest empire of the pre-industrial world. It will explain how couriers carried messages along mountain-ridge roads, up and down stone steps, and over chasm-spanning footbridges. Couriers could pass a message from Quito to Cuzco in 10 days, about the same time as it takes today's modern postal service to deliver a letter between those two cities.

Guiding Question:

How did the Inca communicate over large distances in an empire without the wheel, the horse, or the written word?

Learning Objectives

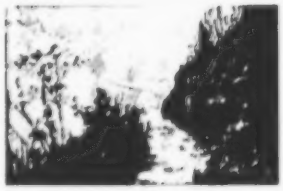
After completing this lesson, students will be able to:

- Describe the Inca as a people who built an empire in the mountains of South America
- Locate the Inca Empire on a map
- Appreciate the challenges of communicating over the large distances and difficult terrain of the Inca Empire
- Describe the role of couriers in the Inca Empire
- Explain the use of *quipus*, colored and knotted ropes carried by couriers that tallied numbers of warriors, amounts of gold, quantities of corn, etc.

Preparing to Teach this Lesson

This lesson plan consists of four learning activities that build upon one another and should, therefore, be used sequentially. The first two activities provide background and context on the Inca Empire. The second two activities consider the Inca courier system. The lesson can be extended by examining the Inca use of *quipus*, the knotted ropes employed for record-keeping.

Much of what we know about the Inca and their empire comes from the Spanish. However, in order to keep the focus on the Inca, the lesson makes no reference to the European conquest of South America.



Inca Trail—Courtesy of Latin American Network Information Center—Angus McIntyre (Raingod.com)

Subject Areas

Art and Culture
Anthropology

History and Social Studies
World History - Latin America

Time Required

Activity 1: 1 class period or less
Activity 2: 1 class period or less
Activity 3: 1 class period or less
Activity 4: 1 class period or less

Skills

map reading
graphic representation of information
critical thinking
communication
collaboration

Additional Data

Date Created: 07/26/02

Review the suggested activities, then download and duplicate any online materials you will need. If desired, you can bookmark specific web pages so that students can access relevant online materials directly; print out required pages and duplicate copies as necessary for student viewing. (See Selected EDSITEment Websites for a guide to locating online materials.)

For Activity 2, you may wish to have at hand a picture book of South America or Peru that helps to show the ruggedness of the Andes terrain.

Suggested Activities

1. Who Were the Inca?

2. Where Were the Inca?

3. Getting Your Message Across the Mountains

4. Play a Game of Telephone

Extending the Lesson: Messages in Knots

1. Who Were the Inca?

As far as the Inca were concerned, theirs was the greatest of all the world's civilizations. They may have been right. Their empire was the largest of the pre-industrial world; their golden capital, Cuzco, the richest city in the Americas.

Beginning in the 1300s, the Inca moved down from their Andean homeland to conquer the neighboring lands and peoples along the Pacific coast of South America. By the time the Spanish arrived in the early 1500s, the Inca Empire was at the height of its power. It stretched some 2,500 miles—the approximate distance from Washington, DC, to Los Angeles, California—and incorporated more than 12 million people speaking 20 different languages.

For background on the empire, consult the EDSITEment-reviewed site Conquistadors; read the pages on "Growth of the Inca Empire."

Begin by asking what the students know about the Inca and the Inca Empire. They may associate the Inca with a number of things, such as the Andes, gold, mummies, South America, terraced farming, llamas, or Machu Picchu.

Explain that there were several significant things that the Inca did not have: the wheel, the horse, or the written word, all of which will have significance for this lesson.

Preview for the students some key words:

- courier—a messenger
- *quipu*—a cord with other (knotted) cords attached, used to keep records
- empire—a territory inhabited by different people that is ruled over by a single sovereign, or monarch
- Andes—the mountain range in South America
- terrain—the physical features of a tract of land
- Peru—the modern-day country in South America that was the heart of the Inca Empire

Before proceeding to the next activity, ask the students to write three to four sentences answering the question, "Who were the Inca?"

2. Where Were the Inca?

Have the students locate the Inca Empire on a map. Show the empire's geographical context by going to the map site on the EDSITEment-reviewed website National Geographic's Xpeditions. On the world map, click on South America. Explain that the Inca Empire stretched along the western part of the

continent, from what is now Colombia to northern Chile.

Examine the empire in more detail by clicking on the map in the right-hand margin of this page from the EDSITEment-reviewed resource Conquistadors.

Explain to the students that one geographical feature dominates this stretch of land: the Andes mountains.

The Andes run for 4,500 miles along the west coast of South America, making them the longest mountain range in the world. They rise 20,000 feet into the air—more than half the height at which a jumbo jet cruises.

There's little oxygen up that high, and it's often bitterly cold. Yet it was there that the Inca built their empire in the clouds—the largest in the pre-industrial world.

Show the students the rugged terrain that made up much of the Inca Empire:

- views of a river, mountains, valley, and pass—at the Inca Trail and Machu Picchu (Virtual Inca Trail), a link available through the EDSITEment-reviewed Latin American Network Information Center (LANIC)
- snow-covered peaks—at the Mountain Institute, a link available through LANIC (click on the images to enlarge)
- a valley, Machu Picchu, and a neighboring peak—at the Andes Web Ring Page (Machu Picchu, A Photo Gallery), a link available through LANIC

Use a picture book of the Andes if you have one.

Have the students write one to two sentences answering the question, "Where were the Inca?"

3. Getting Your Message Across the Mountains

How do you think messages were passed across this great mountain empire—in a time before automobiles and planes and telephones and email? The Inca didn't even have horses or the wheel or a written language. Yes, they had llamas, but these animals didn't like to be ridden and were only used to carry supplies. All traveling was done on foot. How did the Inca pass messages? They used couriers.

Explain that the Inca built a 10,000-mile network of trails, some as wide as 24 feet, to knit together the parts of their empire. Show the students a section of one of the trails at the Virtual Inca Trail, and at the Conquistadors site (click on the road icon in the right-hand margin).

The Inca used couriers throughout the empire, all along the well-made trails. The couriers worked as a kind of relay team. Stationed every few miles, they could carry messages at a speed of 150 miles a day. (They were so fast that the Inca emperor used them for more than just messages; sometimes he had them deliver to his kitchen fresh fish from the Pacific Ocean.)

How do you think the couriers passed on their messages? Remember, they had no written language. They had to pass on memorized messages. So they not only had to have good legs, they had to have good memories, too.

Have the students write two to three sentences answering the question, "How did the Inca get their messages across the mountains?"

4. Play a Game of Telephone

Set up a game of telephone for the class to show how messages that are passed on by word of mouth can go wrong. Have them communicate a message of four sentences.

Then show the students how mnemonics can help.

Have them write the word **INCA** down the left side of a page. Ask them to write out a message using the letters of INCA to spell a message. For example:

I haven't heard from you in a long time.

N ot much going on here.

C an you send me a message by courier?

A ll I need to know is that you're OK.

Have the students memorize the message, then try to deliver it again.

Extending the Lesson: Messages in Knots

To pass on their messages, Inca couriers also used *quipus*. *Quipu* means knot in Quechua, the native language of the Andes. The *quipu* was a useful record-keeping tool for the Inca government. For background, visit Conquistadors; click on the right-hand icon "*Quipus*."

Quipus were special knotted strings that kept track of numbers. Different-colored *quipus* stood for different things. Yellow, for example, stood for gold; red stood for warriors. Different knotted strings were tied together to convey a message.

Have the students make their own *quipu* to show the year they were born.

Ask them to attach four different colors of yarn to a plain-colored string. Let the first string stand for thousands, the second for hundreds, the third for tens, and the fourth for ones. (For example, a student born in 1991 would tie one knot in the first string, nine knots in the second string, and one knot in the last string.)

Selected EDSITEment Websites

- Conquistadors On-line Learning Adventure [http://www.pbs.org/opb/conquistadors/home.htm]
  - Peru [http://www.pbs.org/opb/conquistadors/peru/peru.htm]
- Latin American Network Information Center [http://lanic.utexas.edu/]
  - Countries [http://lanic.utexas.edu/subject/countries/]
  - Peru [http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/peru/]
  - The Mountain Institute (under "Environment) [http://www.mountain.org/Huascaran.html]
  - Social Sciences [http://lanic.utexas.edu/subject/social/]
  - Anthropology and Archaeology [http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/region/anthropology/]
  - The Virtual Inka Trail and Machu Picchu (under "Peru") [http://www.raingod.com/angus/Gallery/Photos/SouthAmerica/Peru/IncaTrail.html]

- The Virtual Inca Trail [http://www.raingod.com/angus/Gallery/Photos/SouthAmerica/Peru/IncaTrail/IncaTrail1.html]
- Andes Web Ring Page (under "Peru") [http://www.jqjacobs.net/andes/index.html]
- Machu Picchu, A Photo Gallery [http://www.jqjacobs.net/andes/machu.html]
- Recreation [http://lanic.utexas.edu/subject/recreation/]
- Travel [http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/region/travel/]
- The Inca Trail to Machu Picchu [http://www.ex.ac.uk/~RDavies/inca/]
- The Ruins on the Inca Trail [http://www.ex.ac.uk/~RDavies/inca/ruins1.html]

- National Geographic's Xpeditions map site [http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/]

Other Information

Standards Alignment

1. NCSS-1

   Culture and cultural diversity. more

2. NCSS-2

   Time, continuity, and change. The ways human beings view themselves in and over time. more

3. NCSS-6

   Power, authority, and governance. more

4. NCSS-7

   Production, distribution, and consumption. more

5. NGS-15

   How Physical Systems Affect Human Systems

6. NGS-4

   The Physical and Human Characteristics of Places

7. NGS-9

   The Characteristics, Distribution, and Migration of Human Population on Earth's Surface

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